

- Fake news / Virus

Disinformation kills

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Verify the information before sharing it. Pausing to check and confirm before sharing information is crucial, especially in a pandemic when correct information shared at the right time saves lives.



While misinformation can be due to human error, intentionally spreading information or disinformation is immoral and illegal.

A day before enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) was re-imposed, thousands crowded into vaccination sites in Metro Manila and Las Piñas, putting everyone at risk of contamination. The panic was reportedly triggered by fake news spread through social media that the unvaccinated will not be allowed to leave their home or receive emergency aid during the ECQ period.

Recently filing charges in court against 80 persons for pandemic-related offenses, the Philippine National Police included 52 individuals for spreading fake news about coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) on the internet.

PNP Chief Guillermo Eleazar said that the “52 were specifically charged with 87 complaints for unlawful use of means of publication and unlawful utterances under Article 154 of the Revised Penal Code as amended to include online libel, violation of the anti-cyber-crime law and violation of Presidential Decree 90, which deemed as unlawful the rumor-mongering and spreading of false information,” reported Inquirer.net on Aug. 12, 2021. In the Covid-19 public health crisis, citizens and governments grapple with an equally virulent contagion, the spread of false information in the infodemic.

According to dictionary.com, the infodemic “spread like never before in 2020,” the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dictionary.com points out that “misinformation” became the “word of the year” in 2018 because, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the spread of information, especially when false, approximates the speed and manner that a virus spreads in a system, causing concern among individuals, governments and civil society.

The “weaponization” of misinformation for malicious or criminal purposes becomes disinformation.

While spreading wrong information may be motivated by diverse reasons, knowingly spreading false information reveals the source or sender’s malice in manipulating the recipient or receiver’s ignorance, lack of critical thinking, or passivity to exploit an advantage or cause harm to a reputation or life.

In the pandemic, the fight against disinformation is similar to taking on the hydra, the mythical monster whose many heads, when cut off, sprouted two for every serpent-head that was severed.

Enhancing one's media literacy helps in curbing misinformation. Disinformation creates as much harm as the virus, with the spreading of "conspiracy theories, propaganda, deep-fakes, fake news, hoaxes, frauds, Photoshops and scams" poisoning people against vaccination.

Due to his relatives' difficulty in getting a phone signal in the upland barangay of Guadalupe in the southwestern town of Alegria in Cebu, Berto, working in Cavite, talks with his brothers only when the latter are in the Poblacion to meet with buyers of their farm produce.

In a recent phone conversation with a brother, Berto learned that many of their relatives and neighbors were staying away from being vaccinated because the stories circulating among them was that those who had been vaccinated were falling sick and dying.

Based on health authorities' data, the virus, not the vaccine, is the cause behind the deaths. According to Jerra Mae J. Librea's report in SunStar Cebu on Aug. 19, 39 Covid-19 deaths were monitored by the Cebu City Emergency Operations Center in 15 mountain barangays during the first 18 days of August 2021. All the fatalities were unvaccinated.

Hercules's fight against the hydra reminds stakeholders that a single effort will not win the fight against misinformation and disinformation. Yet, being responsible in participating in technology-boostered communication helps to turn the tide of the infodemic to favor the people's welfare.